

For abused women, speaking out can be both therapy and power The Hill

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By Betsy Rothstein

When Karen Coleman tells her story of domestic violence, there is no hint of emotion.

Seven years ago, her husband violated a restraining order, broke into her home and raped her at knifepoint. Now her ex-husband, he is serving a three-to-nine year sentence at a minimum-security prison near Buffalo, but is scheduled for release in 2004.

This week, the 46-year-old Yonkers, N.Y., woman comes to Capitol Hill on behalf of Lifetime Television's "Stop Violence Week" to share her story with members of the Congressional Women's Caucus. She has no fear of telling her story again. She calls it her "therapy." Male and female lawmakers of both parties will be participating in events associated with Lifetime Television, a cable channel dedicated to women. They will be commemorating the 1994 Violence Against Women Act. The bill's funding was reauthorized last year and received \$3.5 million - nearly double the amount it received when enacted.

Fortunately for Coleman, the head nurse and coordinator of a sexual assault program who met her husband on a blind date in 1994, times have changed. The Violence Against Women Act provides funding to courts, hospitals and advocacy groups as well as to states to build shelters. It also allows police to arrest perpetrators of physical violence if they can prove that an assault has taken place.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who has worked closely with Lifetime to put together the anti-violence campaign, believes woman lawmakers must take the lead on this issue. "Men are clearly interested in this issue as well, but if women don't take the lead, it's not necessarily on the agenda," said Schakowsky. "It's not a resistance to it, it's a question of priorities."

She explained, "Our constituents are more likely to share their stories with us."

However, Rep. Connie Morella (R-Md.), who was one of the primary sponsors of the Violence Against Women reauthorization bill, said it's essential to have the support of male lawmakers.

"You can't pass anything if you have just women on it, so you have to rely on the guys," said Morella, who added, "You're doing a big selling job."

Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald (D-Calif.), who chairs the Congressional Women's Caucus, finds that male lawmakers are supportive of laws that fight domestic violence. "I don't find it difficult at all," said Millender-McDonald. "The men are typically husbands, fathers and grandfathers."

Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) is one of the original sponsors of the Violence Against Women Act. He says he "thanks God" that none of the women in his family has experienced domestic violence. Biden chaired the Judiciary Committee when he first brought up the bill, and remembers that it wasn't so popular.

"It was such a novel idea to raise the issue of violence against women to a federal level," said Biden. "On one hand, you had all the conservatives making the point that it was a state and family matter. Women's groups were reluctant and worried that it would take the focus off choice issues and sexual preference."

Biden said the Judiciary Committee found that police officers were conditioned to stay out of domestic violence matters.

After the April 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) chose Rep. Judy Biggert (R-Ill.) to serve on a 24-member bipartisan task force to study the root causes of youth violence.

As a result, said Biggert, it was easier to pass reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act because lawmakers became more knowledgeable about the causes of violence among youths.

For Coleman, the memories of her husband's violence against her in her own home remain vivid. On their first date, she recalled that they went to a New York Knicks game at Madison Square Garden. She found him "nice looking," and believed he had a "wonderful personality." They were married a year later.

During much of their marriage, Coleman was unaware that her husband had fathered a child with another woman. When she confronted him about the affair in 1994, he pulled a knife on her. The next day she went to court and sought a restraining order against him; the police removed her husband from their home.

Three weeks later, she woke up to find her husband standing in the doorway of their bedroom holding a knife and some ropes.

It was not Coleman's first exposure to domestic violence. "I grew up with a history of abuse," said Coleman. "My father had abused my mom."

Coleman knows she will probably feel fearful when her ex-husband is released from prison, but she doesn't want to give him that power over her.

"Power is speaking out," said Coleman. "Perpetrators have power over victims when victims remain silent. We need to shout loud and often for everyone else who can't."

